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# DECORATION & FURNITURE

JOHN LA FARGE, ARTIST AND DECORATOR.



WINDOW IN THE C. VANDERBILT HOUSE.

VERY few of the many artists whose homes are now in New York City are natives of the metropolis. One of the few is John La Farge, who was born in Beach Street, near St. John's Park, a region whose respectability has long since yielded to the demands of commerce.

His lineage is French; in fact, his father was the first émigré of his name, so that the chain of Mr. La Farge's associations with France is short and unbroken. On the maternal side (and it is that to which the artist is due) he belongs to one of those French families that swelled the exodus of '93. His great-grandfather made his first visit to this country as one of the promoters of a colonization scheme, and afterward preferred to seek his fortunes in the new world rather than expose his head to the perilous chances likely to overtake a man with his views in France. This same great-grandfather Binsie had been a writer on perspective. His son, Mr. La Farge's grandfather, was a collector and an amateur artist. And, coming down to more immediate relations, his cousin, Paul St. Victor, was an art critic in Paris, a man of brilliant parts, warmly eulogized at his death by Victor Hugo. Thus Mr. La Farge's temperament has been artistic, not accidentally but in accordance with the tendencies of his race.

The father of young La Farge, believing that some acquaintance with art was in accordance with the family traditions, urged that he should gain what he could by study in Paris. He accordingly entered the studio of Couture, where he worked zealously for six weeks or more, emulating with genuine fervor the work of the other students as something beyond what he could do, and consequently feeling for it great respect, but without any personal enthusiasm. At the end of that time Couture said to him:

"I think there is something in you worth saving. These others are all endeavoring to be little Coutures. I leave you to say whether little Coutures are worth anything. Go and travel."

Thus commanded Mr. La Farge set out on a "wander year," making but little else than architectural drawings, in which he was much interested. When he returned to this country his father, satisfied with his accomplishments in art, determined that the true business of life should now begin, and placed him in a law office. Here he passed two years, "kicking against the pricks." At the end of this time, still knowing more of art than law, the would-be artist, against all persuasions and all commands, walked out of the law office to enter it no more.

It is scarcely necessary to recount the facilities for study of that day. The Philistines were abroad. To draw from life demanded both moral courage and cowardice—courage to undertake it, and cowardice to keep discreetly silent about it. Hampered and ill at

feeling the influence of both, but in a sense escaping from the one to the other, being profoundly affected by Millet as he was to the end. Mr. La Farge had already questioned Couture, but Millet he did not know. He saw, however, in the work of Hunt something which answered to his own gropings. But this, unnaturally, did not inspire, but paralyzed him. After vain endeavors he could do nothing in color. Advised by Hunt he began to draw only in paint. He worked in this way steadily, and one day felt he would like to paint some flowers, a sudden wish which he proceeded to gratify. They were probably crude enough, but the master felt that there was something in the color of value. That this was only a temporary suspension of faculties, a little sketch done before this time clearly shows. It is the portrait of a young man, probably

five by six inches, in which the impetuosity of youth unhesitatingly attacks the gravest difficulties. The figure is dressed in white, and sits in the shadow of a white pillar. Beyond is a blue sky and a rift of sunshine. The handling is crude, the young artist is a tyro in hair, he struggles desperately with his whites, but the color is full and delicate. At the end of six months spent with William Hunt, Mr. La Farge painted the portrait of himself leaning on an umbrella, which was shown at the Society of American Artists' Exhibition a few years ago. Those who have seen the painting will understand that it shows as fully as does Mr. La Farge's work to-day that the artist had finally come into possession of himself.

Mr. La Farge's interest in architecture naturally paved the way to decoration. It was a favorite plan with him and some of his architectural companions to do some joint work; the war and different vicissitudes of fortune delayed this. The panel in the recent exhibition of the Society of American Artists, catalogued simply as "Fish," is in fact a decorative panel, one of a series painted in 1865 for a dining-room. An illness prevented the completion of the work, and the compassion due to inanimate things may be properly extended to the unfortunate dining-room, since this panel was one of the things best worth seeing in the exhibition.

An unhappy paralytic stroke, which put an end for several years to his painting, aided Mr. La Farge in turning his attention to decoration, since decoration implies so much more than a man's own handicraft. The extent and diversity of the decorative field which



"CHRIST AND NICODEMUS." BY JOHN LA FARGE.

MURAL PAINTING IN TRINITY CHURCH, BOSTON. DRAWN BY CAMILLE PITON.

ease, wrestling with theories, the necessary "trinity of tones" and what not, the young artist and a few friends struggled on. This lasted for five years. His associates were chiefly a knot of enthusiastic architects, in whose pursuits he was also interested. One day he spoke of his own difficulties to one of them, who asked, "Why don't you go to Bill?" The speaker was R. M. Hunt, and "Bill" was his brother.

Thus advised Mr. La Farge went to Newport and entered the studio of William Hunt, who was then recently from Paris, fresh from Couture and Millet and



Mr. La Farge now occupies, and the varied directions his labor has taken, must be a surprise even to Mr. La Farge himself. They certainly illustrate how far the impetus of a man's ardor may carry him. That impatient quality in the artistic temperament which refuses to be satisfied with expedients, which finds it impossible to compromise, is the cause of much of the progress in art. It is the demand for the exact thing or nothing that impels the artist forward. Something of this sort underlies all artistic undertakings in which any new idea or fact can be recognized.

Mr. La Farge's work in glass illustrates this. The conditions of decorative art in this country before the Centennial provided but scanty equipment for the artists who were to take it up after the stimulus which it then received. This Mr. La Farge found at the outset. In interesting himself in decoration stained glass came of necessity under consideration. The artist may make the design, but he must intrust it to others to be carried out. Every one knows what was meant by stained glass at that time. Comparatively little was produced in America, and imported glass offered but a small range for selection. It was enamel glass almost exclusively, and neither in color nor in design could it satisfy modern ideas of decoration. In intrusting his work to others the artist is always liable to mistranslation, and a man whose art has a distinct and individual stamp is peculiarly situated in this respect. Another disturbing element enters in the commercial responsibility which the artist assumes, and for which his habit of mind is generally ill-adapted. In producing in this way a work of art, changes must be made, mistakes corrected. This involves greater expense, and the artist stands, with his eyes on his ideal, between the workman's demand and his client's written contract. Such experiences are those of every artist who undertakes to work in this way, and if his artistic instincts are keenly alive, he realizes that his only solution of the problem is to control the whole matter.

Starting from this point, and driven by the exigencies of the case, Mr. La Farge's stained glass has become one of his most important departments. The artist is now a manufacturer, and controls one of the largest establishments of the kind in this country. He employs thirty workmen in glass alone, and his commodious ware-rooms are stocked with myriad shades and tints, the results of experiments in producing old and introducing new varieties. From a manufacturing point of view there is no stained glass made which equals that produced in America for artistic purposes. As is known, the color is incorporated in the glass, and is not produced by enamels, and its variety is only limited by the ability to experiment in so fascinating a field. On the opalescent glass Mr. La Farge's first claim as an inventor rests. This simply forestalls by means of chemicals that bewildering iridescence that time and the elements have given to ancient glass, and

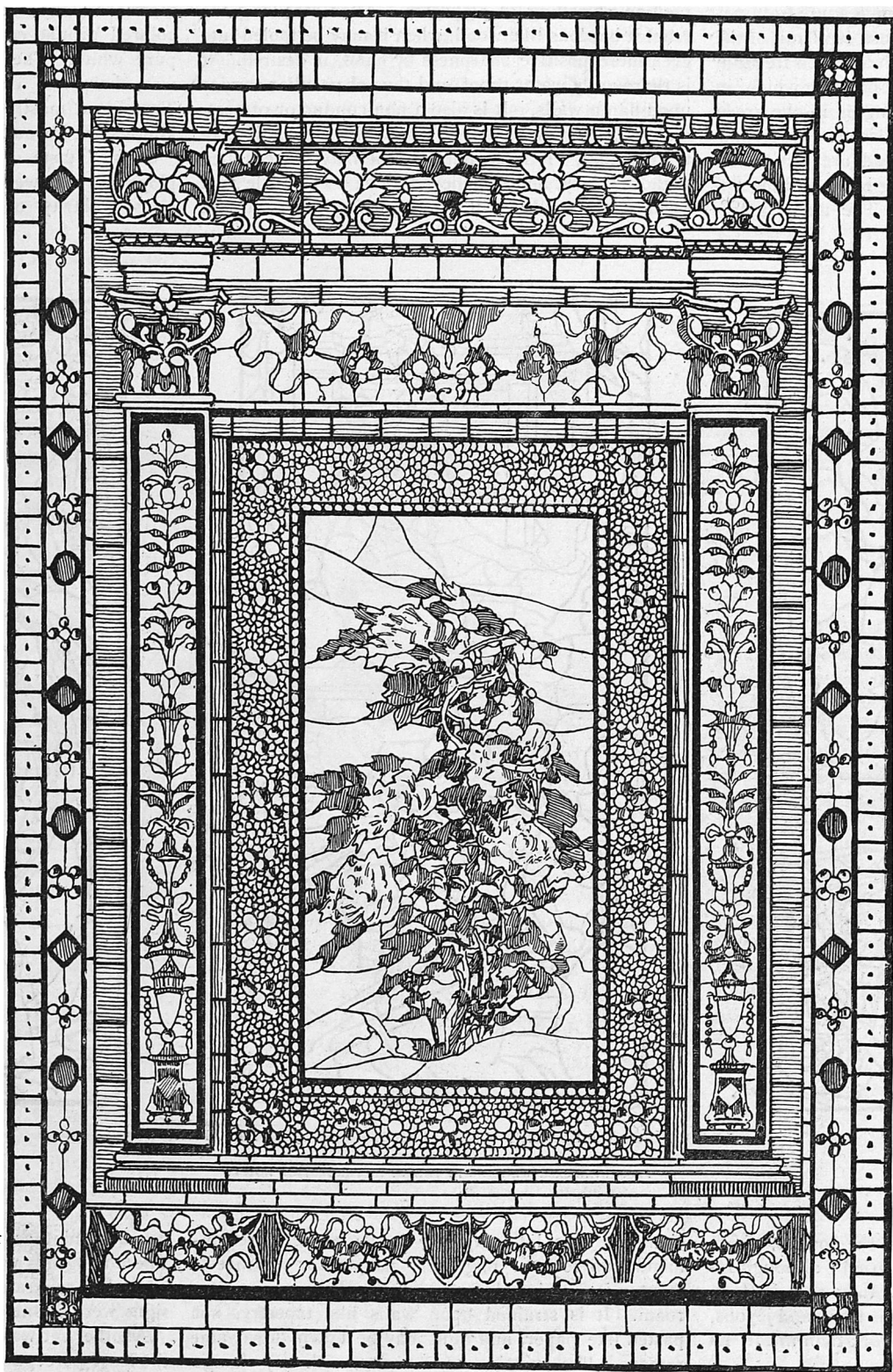
its introduction into modern stained glass was the first new influence it received.

Thus provided with the necessary materials, Mr. La Farge's work in glass has gone steadily on. In its widest sense it is a business guided by commercial rules, but, whether slight or elaborate, whatever is undertaken is the result of artistic deliberation and selection. This comes in the nature of things, since it is impossible for a man of keen artistic instincts not to set his mark on that which passes through his hand. How true this is the work which Mr. La Farge has done illustrates. It is not possible in considering it in general to determine what has specially influenced

their different traditions—arguments much more ingenious than those that demonstrate the visit of Paul to England. Meanwhile the beauty of the work is its own excuse for being, and archæological consistency becomes of minor importance. He does not disdain paint while he relies on mosaics; impatient of the interference of the leads he discards them for fire, and obtains novel effects in chiaroscuro by pouring the molten glass in moulds. Much of his method is new as applied to colored glass, and while greatly enlarging its possibilities, he proceeds simply in obedience to artistic instincts, which demand and must have certain results, no matter how they may be obtained.

In all the various work which Mr. La Farge has done in glass the picturesque, which he joyfully undertakes, is the most significant as well as characteristic, since it strikes at the root of conventional ideas concerning decorative effects in glass. The most prominent example of this is the window in Memorial Hall, Harvard College. It is conceived in heroic style, and it is a question whether there has appeared a more spirited ideal of the heroism and poetry of conflict. The scene belongs to the earlier period of the Renaissance, and allows for the greatest richness and variety of costume. A single figure, that of a young man, holds aloft with one hand a flag whose crimson folds float over the group, and with the other encourages the advance. Behind him follow a crowd of men with spears, pikes and shields; with the red doublet of a soldier as the salient point of color surrounded by the gleaming hues of draperies, leggings and martial implements. A mysterious landscape extends behind this hurlyburly, and its quiet repose and solemnity of color accent the gorgeous pageant and movement of the figures. That the window is pictorial renders it not the less decorative. It is interesting to see how the different effects are secured and how happily the accidents of the glass contribute. At the right a storm cloud is introduced. Although this is in mosaic, the sullen tones are carefully inserted between the uplifted arms, and the effect is unbroken. In the left there is a more striking instance in a piece of glass whose deep blue is broken by a warm yellow which in the picture represents

the sunlight breaking through. On the shoulder of the principal figure is what appears to be a white cloak gayly embroidered. This, in fact, is but a peculiar glass whose creamy white surface is sprinkled with bits of red glass introduced at some stage of the smelting. Such selection obviates the use of paint except in special instances, as in the chasing of the cuirass and the head on the Medusa shield. It is of course understood that the faces and hands are painted. No, not of course. The most wonderful work in glass yet done by Mr. La Farge is the head of an old man reading, in the Crane Library, at Quincy, Mass. One thousand pieces are used in this by actual count, and as many more uncounted,



PEONY WINDOW WITH JEWELLED BORDERS. BY JOHN LA FARGE.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM OF THE CORNELIUS VANDERBILT HOUSE.

him. This is Japanese, that Moorish, another mediæval, but everything is La Farge, and a good deal is nothing else. In these days of invention rather than creation almost every one has some theory of decoration. Mr. La Farge seems to be unsupplied, or rather his circumference touches all and is limited by none. He uses flat color and conventional designs, when it suits him. He introduces perspective, and gets pictorial effects in the midst of his most vivid decoration. He puts a Japanese panel in a Pompeian setting, and will justify its probability in arguments which embrace the movement of races, and commercial and artistic enterprises before the discovery of America, including the gathering of workmen in the south of Europe with

the greater number so small that they had to be handled with pincers. These pieces were united by nine fusings, each at a certain risk. This piece of glass is undoubtedly unique, and its proper place would be in some great museum. On some points not carefully guarded a little paint was required to satisfy minute criticism. But the work demonstrates a hitherto unknown possibility of art in glass.

There is no limit to what can be done in this way in color, since the tints of a cathedral window can thus be brought into a hand's space, as could not possibly be done by leading. What this method of fusing can effect in another way, one of the Ames windows illustrates. It is a group of hollyhocks in bloom, with a bit of brown meadow and a blue sky in the background. The design is copied from a study from nature, and the freshness and exactness in detail of the study are repeated in the glass with as much freedom as might be shown in a water-color painting which, in fact, it resembles. The only leading is in the green bank behind the stalks. The landscape in perspective and the blithe blue sky beyond are accidental qualities in the glass, and by fusing leave nothing apparent but the artistic intention. The most signifi-

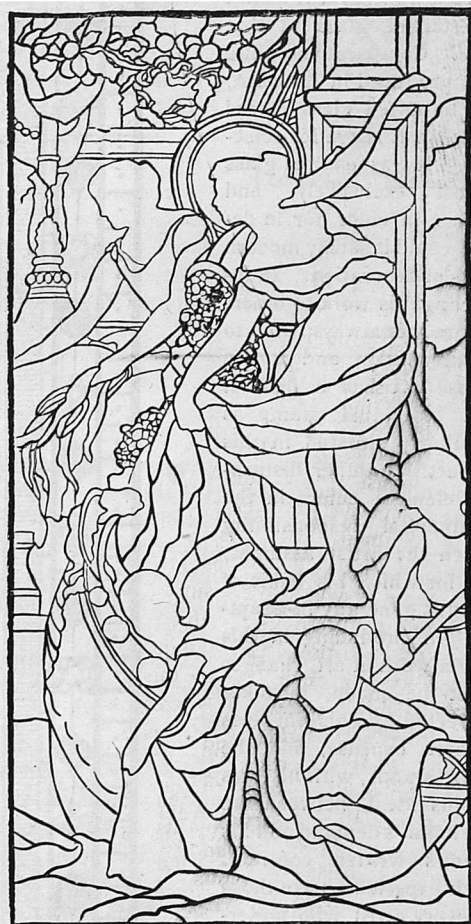
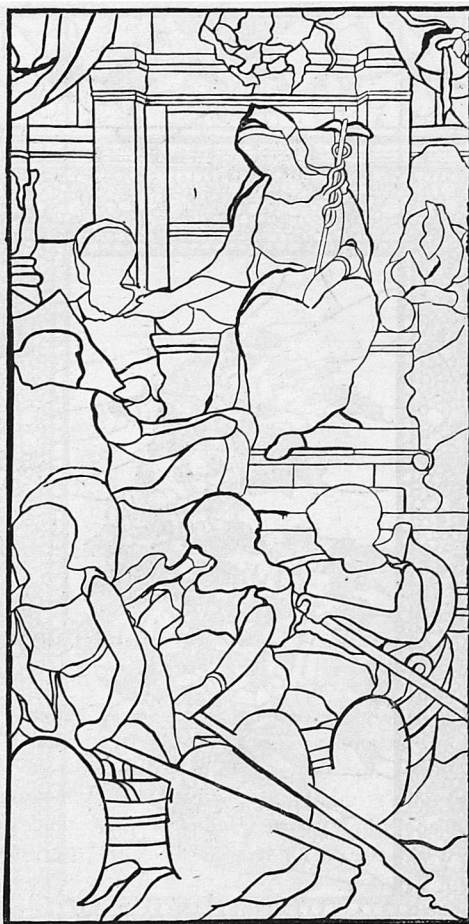
cant result of the process is seen in the flowers, whose tints and form are wonderfully varied; although resembling brush work so forcibly they are, in fact, mosaics united by fire. The color is frank and joyous, and there is less reticence in the work than in Mr. La Farge's work in general.

change. This latter quality is an especial recommendation for our migratory people, for an investment in it promises decorated walls wherever one may roam. It is strained upon walls like tapestry, not pasted like paper, and thus may be taken down and removed, like curtains and carpets, with any change of domicile. With all these advantages it is sold at only about the cost of good French papers, and the manufacturers promise to decorate an ordinary sized room—ten feet in height, and twenty by fifteen in dimensions—for from one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars.

From this cursory description, it may be seen that this new invention covers the ground of two things at the same time. It is both wall covering and wall decoration, and in its latter character has prominent advantages over usual decorations in the fact that its color may be changed, if ever a change in furnishing throws its original hue out of harmony with the general effect of the room. Of course, the "crusta," the cupids, ferns, garlands, sunflowers, lilies and what not, originally impressed upon it, must remain unchanged forever, but a thin wash of color with a new and judicious "picking out," or even a coat of

paint and "flattening" will transform the whole effect into whatever may be aimed at.

The hangings for a room, lately made of this material, were of the daintiest character possible to imagine. Walls covered with the texture of a sultana's tunic could not be more delicate—even a tunic covered all over with huge pearls. Conscious though we are that the chaste designs, set in elegant medallions or straying like sprays of wild brier over the wall, are merely mechanical, the creations of perfect machinery, we cannot help feeling that the conception of the designs upon which we look is often exquisite, and the effect as near artistic perfection as anything can be not wrought out with slow and loving labor of brain and hand. Of the hangings just mentioned, one set was of a pale straw or cream-colored ground covered with "Adam" decorations of pure white. The relief of these "Adam" designs was sharp and clear, as if chiselled in alabaster. They were mostly medallions, reminding one of the famous Wedgwood medallions upon which the best "classic" taste of the eighteenth century found employment, and were preserved from any "setness" or over-regularity of effect by delicate uniting ara-



LEAD LINES OF STAINED GLASS PANELS. BY JOHN LA FARGE.

FROM STAIRCASE WINDOWS IN THE W. H. VANDERBILT HOUSE.

hesques, faint as a dream of flowers in one's sleep. These hangings were divided into dado, frieze and filling, each separate, of course, although the varied designs were of one general character.

Another set was the color of pear-wood, the ground the least perceptible shadow of a shade darker than the decoration, which for the filling, was in delicate relief, a light veil as it were of carving thrown over the ground. The dado and frieze were in high relief, however, and were realistic fruits and flowers bound with the tendrils of vines. The veined leaves and full rounded plums and pears were like Grinly Gibbons's carvings upon wood. Still another set, also the shade of newly-carved wood, was covered all over with a fine tracery like the low conventional carvings one sees in choirs of Italian cathedrals. Others again are like Jacobean carvings, sombre and dark, in long panels after the fashion of English manor houses of the seventeenth century, and would seem almost out of place without monumental chimney-pieces of carved marble and chairs and tables of solemnly architectural style.

In fact, the designs for these hangings are almost as innumerable as the forms of art itself. Some are